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The Tattoo

OC OC

The Dravorian interrogator smirked down at the Terran soldier being held prisoner. She had sensed the soldier's fear which had initially settled down but then spiked dramatically, strangely enough, when the soldier was stripped naked before being placed in the interrogation pod. She next examined and took notes about soldier's body. It was a typical Terran male body for one engaged in combat work, according to her research and investigation about Terrans. He was physically fit, had several scars, and had minor cyber augmentation to limbs to repair damage beyond that which natural healing could recover. One thing Alyxr'gia found interesting was the pictures on the soldier's skin. Apparently Terrans have a tradition among certain members of their species of using needles to poke ink under their skins to make pictures or messages. Her research showed that it had begun with early, more primitive cultures but was continued to be practiced to this day. Alyxr'gia smirked again looking over the pictures on the soldier's skin. Willingly subjecting themselves to such things must strengthen their physical and mental stamina. This interrogation will be fun she thought to herself.

Alyxr'gia continued to examine the pictures and messages, trying to learn what she could to use in the interrogation. One inked image that caught her attention in particular was the large piece on the Terran's chest, depicting a dramatic picture of a Terran skeleton, wearing a robe, and holding a primitive Terran farming implement in one hand, and beckoning with the other. The inked figure seemed to be grinning and behind it was a rectangular opening, a Terran doorway as Alyxr'gia understood from her research, within which was depicted a building that had a pointed roof of Terran religious significance, and what looked like twelve rocks sticking out of the dirt with writing on them. Alyxr'gia identified them as ancient Terran markers for where they buried their dead. Above the picture was written the phrase "La Oscuridad De Mi Corazon" on a scroll. The interrogator wondered what that could mean, and began searching in her comm tablet for a meaning. Hmmm.....The darkness of my heart. The interrogator pondered the meaning behind the depiction of a dead Terran and heart darkness. Maybe this Terran was dangerous to other Terrans and that was why he had been left behind when their forces had retreated from the planet they had named Sonora. Alyxr'gia then wondered if maybe there was something wrong with the soldier's coronary muscle, and that was why there were references to death. She rapidly switched to the medical section of the Terran's file. No, no, there was nothing of note wrong there. The answers would be more available during the incursion in to the soldier's mind she presumed. Alyxr'gia picked up the cognitive interface in her claws and placed it appropriately on her head, connecting with her antennae and her five compound eyes. With a little apprehension she activated the system and dove in.

Miguel floated in nothingness. He had been briefed on the Dravorian interrogation techniques and so was not surprised when he was placed in a sensory deprivation chamber. The whole part where he was stripped naked had freaked him out a little, as the Dravorians were a female dominated species and the fact that they looked a lot like praying mantises had him concerned for the attachment his head felt for the rest of his body and vice versa. As he floated there he felt a small shock, a bit like with static

electricity, and he knew something was coming. "It's go time" he thought to himself. He took a deep breath and started descending in to himself mentally, per the training he had gone through. Hiding the infinite mind, placing layer after layer of artificial shells, creating landscapes or other triggers for memories that he knew inside and out and brought him strength. Miguel felt confident in his skills but also knew this was going to be a battle, his first one with a Dravorian, and he hoped that he could carry out his mission, even if its success potentially meant he would never be able to return to the physical world.

Alyxr'gia willed herself to move through the ether that was the cognitive containment system currently holding the Terran soldiers thoughts. It was designed for safety and to allow control by the Dravorian interrogators against more psychically active enemies. Dravorian interrogators took pride in their ability to pull the information from their victim's minds, rather than having to physically torture them. The information was far more accurate, and there was never any serious charges of war crimes or demands for retribution after conflicts or wars as there was no physical mistreatment, and the victims usually were not in a mental state to talk about what had happened to them. The information extracted was instantaneously transferred to the Dravorian intelligence command, for immediate application on the battlefield, thus maximizing the Dravorian forces' ability to capitalize and exploit any sliver of useful information almost immediately. They had utilized this to great effect during the initial invasion of planet Sonora, having kidnapped one of the Terran settlers there beforehand and pulling out all of their thoughts. Unfortunately that Terran had not survived the process, but the Dravorians had plausible deniability about the death as no one had witnessed her abduction.

Alyxr'gia found him in the cognitive containment system's mind space. The male soldier's consciousness moved throughout the ether randomly, as if exploring boundaries or something. As she moved toward his consciousness, the soldier's consciousness began to solidify, but rather than a figure it eventually solidified to represent a door. Alyxr'gia "looked around" with her mind, her visual receptors seeing a mottled grey everywhere around her that reminded her of the static when a transmission was interrupted, and when she returned her view to the front, she saw directly in front of her a black door with a shiny gold handle. She hesitated. This was new. Usually the beings she interrogated were not so orderly or definite in their thought presence or projections. Past interrogations of other species had ranged from trying to stop a slide show stuck on fast forward when dealing with the Orlum, or jumping in to the middle of a psychic maelstrom when trying to question the Slurvd and taming those mental winds. There was none of that here though. No sense of panic and a very distant indication of fear, probably represented in the door being colored black, Alyxr'gia reasoned. She thought for a second about withdrawing, doing further research on Terrans and their training before continuing, but the first dives were the most productive as the victim was unused to the experience and unable to muster an effect defense to the psychic probing. Also, the cognitive containment system would protect her. It gave her control over this mind space and if it detected that her sanity was being compromised, it would simultaneously, automatically disconnect Alyxr'gia from the space and fry the Terran's brain. With those thoughts digested, she reached out and took the door handle, turned it, and started pushing it open.

Alyxr'gia blinked her five eyes in surprise. One moment she was turning the door handle, the next she found herself standing on an open sandy plain, a bright yellow and smaller red star shining down on her and making her close one of her sets of lids to reduce the glare. She heard a creaking behind her and she whirled around just in time to see the black door close with a slam

and then disappear. Alyxr'gia found herself blinking again as she looked around. There were mountains in the distance and small patches of short scrub plants and tall green vegetative spires covered in spikes. The ground was a mix of rock and sand and it all seemed to be one shade or another of brownish gold. She recognized the terrain as being on the planet Sonora. "This will go so much easier if you stop hiding" Alyxr'gia thought spoke in to the space.

"I'm not hiding, I'm here, waiting for you."

Alyxr'gia thought spoke again, "Alright, well then, let's get started." She was willing herself to stay calm and focused as the Terran had still not manifested his thought presence as a figure. She was aware that he was still active in the mind space though, like something moving between the walls of this reality. Alyxr'gia acknowledged that she was dealing with someone who was familiar, if not practiced, in the art of psychic martial arts. She reached out, probing the mind space again, searching for the Terran's consciousness so she could pin it down and begin extracting the data she was looking for. Momentarily distracted from her current position in the mind space due to searching, part of her consciousness signaled alarm and she ceased searching and began focusing on her thought presence there. The thought existence that she had been in, memories of a place on Sonora, had begun to melt, as if someone had placed a comm tablet too close to a heating element. Everything she thought saw was elongating, stretching down to some unknown bottom where it began to pool. A momentary panic set in when Alyxr'gia realized that her thought presence had begun to melt too.

She took a deep breath and followed her training. She calmed her mind and engaged in the pre-established set of memories that she knew inside and out, brought her strength, and defended her consciousness and sanity. "Play time was over, it was time to establish once and for all what was going on here, an interrogation, and who was in charge, her", Alyxr'gia thought. She thought created a bright, white room with a table and two chairs, her sitting in one, and the Terran's consciousness sitting in the other. She reached out through the mind space and found the Terran's consciousness, and thought projected her creation in to that part of the mind space. When her consciousness aligned with her thought projection, she was happy to find that it had mostly worked. The white room, the table, the chairs, and her thought presence were all there intact. Something was off though. Instead of a solidified thought presence representing the Terran soldier's consciousness, there was a figure made up of the same mottled grey material she had seen before, like some kind of being made out of static. Alyxr'gia thought carefully how to proceed. While she acknowledged the skill of her Terran opponent, she felt that she needed to establish her dominance here and take control. There was a limit as to how long she could dive effectively, and that clock was ticking.

"Delay tactics will do you no good Terran" Alyxr'gia thought spoke to the figure. "I will get the information I am after, sooner or later, it is just a matter of time, and I have all of it in the world. So please stop stalling and give me what I want."

"What do you want?"

Alyxr'gia huffed in exasperation. "You're thoughts you fool. Seriously, stop playing games, I do not want to have to damage your consciousness any more than what will naturally occur during an extraction." She softened her tone, "Do not worry, there will only

be a brief moment of pain, but then it will all be okay."

"Pain."

The word exploded through Alyxr'gia's head, momentarily consuming her consciousness. At the same time there had been a blast of psychic energy. A thought unleashed, similar in intensity to a Slurvd maelstrom, but instead of a planet wide storm, the energy had been pinpoint focused on Alyxr'gia's thought presence. Alyxr'gia rocked back in her chair, her psychic shields holding, but just. Her established set of memories had held, but the echoes of the blast made it difficult to focus on them. She grabbed one of the echoes to examine it and was immediately surrounded in the sounds of roaring flames and screaming. The hot wind of the roaring fires and the smell of blood filled her sense organs and all around her she saw rubble, bodies, and parts of bodies of various species, mostly Terran. Alyxr'gia let go of the echo, disturbed not by what she had seen, felt, or smelled, but by the fact that she had experienced a memory with three of her sense organs. Orlum memories were mostly visual, and the difficulty in dealing with them was usually slowing them down enough to pick out individual ones. Slurvd memories were mostly visual, but occasionally would have sound, although the sounds were not synched to the visual memories and this was typically present only in those experiencing great distress and on the edge of losing hold of their sanity. The memory that Alyxr'gia had just experienced had only been an echo, an after image of the original, but it had contained three senses and they were all synched.

Alyxr'gia decided that she was done for today. She needed far more research and would need to consult with her superiors before she dealt with this any further. She refocused her thought presence to the room with the grey figure, but was stunned when the thought projection revealed that the grey figure and the chair were gone. Instead there was a black door with a gold handle, exactly the same as the first one. Alyxr'gia thought spoke, "Haha. Very funny changing your thought presence to a door. I have taken everything I need for today, but I will be back soon" she bluffed. Her message was met with silence. "Fine, whatever" Alyxr'gia thought. "He's not going anywhere anytime soon and I will crack him sooner or later." She briefly scanned for his consciousness, which was still active in the mind space, and then she focused on surfacing. She dismissed the current thought projection and thought created a new room, similar to the one her physical body was in, with her in it alone, and a sliding door that she would walk through to exit from the mind space. She scanned the mind space and thought projected her creation to a location that did not contain any of the Terran's consciousness. When her consciousness aligned with her thought projection she stopped in her tracks. Instead of a familiar room and a sliding door, she was surrounded by mottled grey and in front of her was a black door with a gold handle.

Trying not to panic she initiated the emergency procedures for when interrogation dives go wrong. She recalled her established set of memories, going through them quickly so she could move on to the next step of signaling the cognitive containment system for an emergency surface. All she had to do was follow her training and everything would be alright. Except something was wrong. Something with her established set of memories. One of them wasn't what it should have been. She hastily went through them again. There was the memory of being a broodling and being assigned a matron and bonding with her chemically and

psychically. There was the memory of being chosen as a soldier to fight for the Dravorian Empire. Continuing down the list of memories of her training as a soldier, her first kill, a small dark haired girl in a pink dress and tiara, the time she drank too much fglor and got sick....wait. Why was there a memory of a Terran girl in her established set of memories? Alyxr'gia tried to remove the memory from her set, but it was her memory now. "No!" Alyxr'gia thought screamed and tried to get back the memory that was supposed to be there, something about the day she graduated from training with her hive sisters. The memory had come back for a brief second but then it evaporated again, leaving Alyxr'gia grasping at emptiness. Then she started remembering. It had been a celebration. A birthday, which while uniquely human and never acknowledged in Dravorian culture, now seemed to make perfect sense to Alyxr'gia. The young girl danced and sang along with everyone else wishing her a happy birthday. When she stopped dancing, the little girl looked up and with a big smile, puffed up her cheeks and blew.

Alyxr'gia found she was standing in front of the black door again, surrounded by the mottled grey static. Panic setting in she turned to run, only to discover that the ground was no longer there as she feel and eventually collided with something. Alyxr'gia could taste her blood in her mouth where her mandibles had collided with whatever surface was under her. Alyxr'gia knew she should not be able to taste. This was a mental projection and there was no need for taste in this mind space. She curled her thorax and brought her legs up forming a ball. She just had to wait. Yes! That was it! Eventually the timer that limited how long a dive could take place would count down, and emergency surface procedures would be initiated! She went through her established set of memories again, working to maintain her sanity. Everything seemed to be as it should except...no, wait. Why was there a memory of an old Terran woman dying? Without actively willing it the memory began to play for Alyxr'gia. The old woman, laying on a bed reached up. There were tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. Her lips moved and she whispered, "My boy! You're here! You remember our song?"

"Si Mama, recuerdo." Said a male Terran voice.

Both the old woman and the unseen male began singing. "One for you." And then the old woman and the male made a sucking sound with their lips. "One for me." Both of them made another set of sucking sounds. "In the end, we shall see, who has the love in their heart." After this the old woman settled back in to her bed, took a deep breath, and then stopped breathing.

Alyxr'gia couldn't remember what memory she was supposed to have instead of this one. She could only remember singing a song with her mother right before her mother died, but it wasn't her mother! Alyxr'gia thought shouted, "If you carry on with this the cognitive containment system will trigger the failsafe and send a burst of radiation in to your brain, ending your life!"

"My brain or your brain?" A disembodied voice asked. It then began to sing. "One for you, one for me, in the end, we shall see, who has the darkness in their heart."

What did the Terran mean "My brain or your brain?" Alyxr'gia panicked. Maybe if too many of her memories were replaced with the Terran's the cognitive containment system would get confused and fry her brain instead. "How much longer before the safety timer tripped. What if the mixing of memories has messed up the system? I have to hold on so my brain doesn't get fried! My

memories. I'll review my memories!" Alyxr'gia thought confidently. She reviewed her established set of memories again. Nothing seemed out of place for the Dravorian interrogator, the little girl in the pink dress, the old woman on the bed, a dog and some body of water, eating Terran food with a woman, all of her established set of memories made sense except for one. There was one memory out of place and it involved a giant insect creature that was moving its mandibles rapidly. Alyxr'gia was afraid to examine that memory, but felt somehow compelled to do so.

"Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia, get a hold of yourself!" The creature shouted at her. "You are a soldier in the Dravorian Empire and you will not succumb to this Terran filth!"

"I'm a what?" Alyxr'gia thought. Something was off. Nothing was making sense anymore and she wasn't sure how to proceed. She returned to the memory.

"Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia, you are in danger of being compromised by the Terran and you must regain control of the mind space immediately"

Alyxr'gia snapped out of the confusion she had been experiencing. "The brood mother is right! I cannot succumb to this Terran filth. I will regain control of the mind space, complete the emergency process for surfacing, and then forward all information to the intelligence command!" She thought to herself.

"Excellent work Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia. I'm glad to see you've broken free of the Terran's tricks. Alright, now in order to make sure you do this right tell me the steps you will be taking to complete the surfacing and reporting to intelligence command!"

Alyxr'gia felt very proud. She had defeated a mighty foe and had earned the commendation of her brood mother. After confirming the emergency surface and transmission protocols with the brood mother, Alyxr'gia completed the steps. As her consciousness aligned with her thought projection, she found herself surrounded by mottled grey static, standing in front of a black door with a gold handle. Alyxr'gia screamed and fell to her knees, her claws scratching gouges in her head and tearing out some of her eyes. A voice quietly sang to her. "One for you, one for me, in the end, we shall see, who has the darkness in their heart."

Shortly thereafter the timed safety system initiated an emergency surface for Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia. An alarm notified other Dravorian interrogation staff that there had been an emergency procedure initiated but also that information had been passed on to the Dravorian Empire's intelligence command. An investigation was started as to why Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia had sought fit to gouge her head and eyes out with her claws and the possible failure of the cognitive containment system.

Although Interrogator Primary Alyxr'gia had the same number of established set memories as when she began the interrogation, they appeared to have been corrupted. Gathering information on the investigation had been hampered, however, by the fact that the only thing Alyxr'gia was capable of saying was to repeat "One for you, one for me, in the end, we shall see, who has the darkness in their heart." A parallel investigation was also started to determine what information regarding the Terran had been sent to the intelligence command and why within twenty four hours of transmission many of the Dravorians working in the

intelligence command had taken their own lives. Six days later, as the information networks of the Dravorian Empire became increasing useless due to an unknown phenomena involving a series of images showing a small Terran girl in a pink dress among others, and the audio being stuck repeating the same message over and over about the darkness in their heart, the Dravorians surrendered.

Miguel enjoyed the hell out of the hot shower, and was looking forward to a cold beer or two later off base once he finished up his tasks at the 102nd Terran Psychological Warfare Battalion. As he walked down the hall with just a towel around his waist he passed another soldier. "Hey Miguel, nice work out there 'mano! You really shook those bugs up! Glad to see you were part of the first POW exchange."

"Yeah, well, just doing my duty, right? After the first interrogation they just left me in my cell. I was hoping for another shot at them but..." Miguel shrugged his shoulders.

"Hah, yeah, I guess, but you really did a number on them. I even heard that the bug who tried to interrogate you offed herself."

"Yeah, well she was pretty messed up, so I'm not surprised, right?"

"Man, Miguel, they're all messed up dude! Anyway I was thinking we could grab some beers lat...woah dude, when did you have time to get new ink?"

"Whatta ya mean?"

"I mean the Grim Reaper tat. Weren't there twelve gravestones before? Now I'm counting thirteen."

"Dude! You're paying way too much attention to my body amigo. I told you that ain't my style. I've always had thirteen gravestones on this tat. Huh, some super spook you are." Miguel laughed.

The other soldier laughed too. "Yeah, whatever. Anyway, beers at 1730 after retreat, right?"

"You got it amigo!" Miguel smiled as he continued to walk down the hall, humming a familiar tune. "One for you, one for me...."